

THE COUNT OF THE ELIMUS OX

By George Barton

ONE morning Barnes was handed a long official looking envelope containing the imprint of the state department. It was not unusual for him to receive correspondence from the seat of government, but this was the first time he had been honored with a communication direct from the cabinet officer who controls the foreign relations of the nation. He tore the letter open quickly and read it from beginning to end with avidity. It was long and important and held several enclosures. The revelations were unusual enough to make even such a seasoned veteran blink with astonishment. He read the letter very carefully a second time and as he concluded glanced at his calendar on the wall beside his desk.

"Clancy, we've got to be in Fall River before 7 o'clock tomorrow night," the young man, accustomed to sudden calls, saluted and said:

"All right, sir, I'll go home, pack my grip and meet you in an hour."

"Being expeditions," he made their connections and were in Fall River an hour before the appointed time. As they lounged on the wharf watching the boat get up steam preparatory to its night trip to New York, the chief turned to his assistant with his most official manner:

"We are here to identify and shadow a man and a woman. The man is short and thick set, with a smooth face and a swarthy complexion. He carries a little ebony music box, which has a lid decorated with a royal crown. The woman is tall, thin and angular, with sharp features and has a big Maltese cat, which is her inseparable companion."

"That's a bulky description," exclaimed Clancy, "enthusiasm getting the better of respect for a description. A fellow would have to be near sighted to miss a couple like that."

While they were talking, a stranger came along the pier, warbling a French song. The watchers were all attention. The newcomer tallied with the description given by the chief inspector. Around him hung the heavy aroma of music. In his right hand he carried an ebony music box, with a gilt crown on its lid. He walked on to the boat and, poking his head into the window of the purser's room, handed in a check and in return received the key of a reserved stateroom. He marched away singing blithely.

Barnes rushed up to the little ebony hole.

"Who was that man," he demanded.

"Count Velasquez," replied the purser before he had time to consider the propriety of the question.

The chief returned to his assistant, satisfied.

"It's our man all right," he said. "He's traveling under the name of a Spanish nobleman. We mustn't lose sight of him."

"Why?" asked Clancy, with a full knowledge of the fact that he had no right to ask questions.

"You'll know before we reach New York. In the meantime, don't be surprised at my actions. And for the love of heaven, watch this count to see the effect of what I do or say on him."

"I suppose," ventured Clancy, with what was intended for withering sarcasm, "that it wouldn't be a bad idea to get acquainted with him?"

"You must get acquainted with him!" came like a shot.

The two men procured a stateroom merely a matter of form, because neither had any intention of sleeping that night. Presently the count's wife, with her Maltese cat, came aboard and was ushered to her room. The count himself strolled about the boat, leaning clouds of cigarette smoke in his wake. Everywhere he went he carried the little ebony music box with him.

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York he invited Barnes and Clancy to join him in a "nightcap" in the little sitting room attached to his cabin. They readily assented. It was the finest room on the boat, with cushioned seats on both sides. The countess was there with her cat. After the presentation had been made and the "nightcaps" disposed of she exclaimed:

"My dear Edouard, you are the most thoughtful of men!"

"Ah! you are teasing me," cried the count, shaking his feminine fingers at the woman. "You ladies, you ladies, you are all alike. Floating like light clouds 'twixt our gaze and heaven, I quote from memory, but my most expresses the thought somewhere."

Having delivered himself of these emotional sentiments the count sank into the seat opposite his wife and gazed at her with dreamy eyes. Curled up on the plush cushions, he instinctively suggested the wildest of the four footed family, the fox. He sat there with his legs crossed and his arms folded, blinking and chucking in the most disconcerting way. All of his features lent themselves in a startling manner to this resemblance to the most cunning and satiation of animals. It could be seen in the erect, pointed ears; in the long nose which seemed to be perpetually on the scent of something; in the sharp eyes at once observant and evasive; in the broad countenance which indicated not only intellectual capacity but ingenuity and a flimsiness for strategy. A reader of character would have said that this was a man naturally of a timorous disposition, yet who, if driven into a corner, could exhibit a boldness bordering on courage. The soft white hand with the pinkish finger nails suggested effeminacy, as did the general make-up of this gentle, soft spoken, perfumed and bejeweled person.

The talk was of travels, and Clancy listened with open ears and astonishment while Barnes represented himself to the others as the great American traveler. He said there was no part of the civilized globe he had not visited, and spoke glibly of London, Paris, Madrid and St. Petersburg. Clancy was lost in admiration at the cleverness with which the chief played his part. Presently the countess begged leave to retire for a while. Her seat was taken by Jerome Harvey, a fellow passenger who had become acquainted with the count a short time before and who seemed fascinated by the oily language of the nobleman. Count Velasquez voiced the general desire to hear more of Barnes' travels.

"Tell us about Madrid," he said. "Surely something out of the ordinary must have occurred to you while there."

"There was nothing personal to me," replied Barnes, looking at the countess with half closed eyes. "Incidentally, though, I heard many queer stories."

"Tell us one of them," said Harvey.

"Perhaps," continued Barnes, as if the other had not spoken, "the most interesting of these was the adventure of the distinguished foreigner and the countess of Yarmouth."

"That sounds interesting," cried Clancy.

"Well," began Barnes, puffing away at a perfecto, "one day the society of Madrid was increased by the arrival of a stranger, a foreigner of distinguished appearance. He was cultured, agreeable and made many friends. He spoke Italian fluently, although that was not his native tongue. Not many weeks had passed before he undertook to form a little class for instruction."

"That sounds all right," commented Harvey, as Barnes paused to puff at his cigar.

"It was all right," smiled Barnes, "for a while, and then, as sometimes happens in Spain, it turned out to be all wrong. There was an agitation going on in the provinces outside of Madrid."

The peasantry, goaded to desperation by poverty, were holding secret meetings with a view of rising against the authorities. The military and the police were constantly on the alert, so that the movement did not make much progress. About that time an English vessel arrived at one of the sailing ports. It had been passed by the proper officials and seemed perfectly regular. Still, precaution is always considered important in Spain, and two inspectors were sent to make a scrutiny of the newly arrived vessel.

"They found nothing out of the ordinary," the master of the vessel having declared clean papers, the officials retired and made a report of their investigation. But on the following day, after part of the cargo had been transferred to a lighter it was discovered that several cases marked 'Italian books' had been smuggled into the hold."

The count pulled out his handkerchief and mopped the perspiration from his brow.

"It was about dusk," said Barnes, continuing his story, "the distinguished foreigner was in evening dress. He took his hat off the rack, and throwing his outer coat over his arm, said with easy assurance:

"Gentlemen, I have an already late dinner, and I am already late; for a dinner party I am already late; and you can look over the books and talk to me about them in the morning—unless you care to await my return to-night, which will be in about two hours."

"Could anything be more polite or obliging?" the police thought not. The man, however, was not so pleasant as his manner seemed. He was even being called upon to open these heavily bound boxes at such an unreasonable hour. It took him about 20 minutes to find the implements with which to open the boxes. When the boxes were taken off the first box nearly an hour had elapsed. A mass of strange and heavy cardboard and beneath this, in warlike array, was layer after layer of magazines for repeating rifles. The second box was filled to the brim with ammunition.

"Horrid!" at the discovery, the officers immediately placed the man under arrest, and awaited the return of the master. They may be sure that they were not long in coming. He never returned. He must have proceeded to the railway station on leaving the house and taken the first train out of Madrid. Telegrams came to the frontier and to all of the stations, but the arable teacher of Italian was not apprehended.

"What was he like?" asked the count with sudden interest.

"Well, the curious part of the story is the fact that I never set eyes on him. I heard of his arrival, conversed with those who had arranged to take lessons from him, and was even in the house he had leased for his stay in Madrid, but never came face to face with the man himself."

"And your distinguished foreigner, your professor of Italian?" he queried tauntingly. "Was he?"

"Yes," interrupted Barnes, "was a revolutionist or the backer of a filibustering expedition, or an anarchist, or whatever title you choose to give him. I call him my man of mystery."

"Didn't the government have a description of him?" asked Harvey.

"Oh, yes," replied Barnes. "They issued a circular offering a reward for his apprehension. I have one here now," and reaching into his inside pocket, he pulled out a long red sheet of paper printed in Spanish with heavy black type.

The count's eyes fairly danced in his head.

"How about the vessel that brought these boxes?" asked Harvey.

Barnes laid the circular on the cushioned seat by his side before answering.

"That was another remarkable thing," he said. "When they went to find the master of the vessel early the next morning, the crew had disappeared—disappeared as completely as if it had dropped to the bottom of the sea. You can imagine how chagrined the officials felt. In fact, the disappearance of the crew had been the only thing that made it even a possibility. Of course the papers were permitted to print little or nothing about it, but the facts leaked out, and reaching into his inside pocket, he pulled out a long red sheet of paper printed in Spanish with heavy black type."

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man who figured in the Italian book episode.

"One night, at a largely attended meeting, she worked her hearers up to a perfect frenzy. She said there was always work for pure hearts and willing hands, and as an illustration of this told in a melodramatic manner the story of the Paris Commune. After that meeting the woman in red was carried about the crowded parts of the city amid the shouts and the cheers of the multitude. Imagine this person—tall, thin, wiry, with coal black hair carefully parted in the middle; the straw hat with its red rose on either side and the big Maltese cat under her arm. She was a sight to behold; the mob, but, as it proved, she had gone a step too far. The police learned of it, and before midnight a warrant for her arrest was out. She was taken to the police force with loaded muskets proceeded to her residence for the purpose of escorting her to the prison. The woman was waiting to go through the formality of consigning her to jail. The door was locked, they pounded on it, but received no reply. They burst it open, and found—an empty house."

The bird had flown. But the peculiar part of it, to my mind, was the fact that her escape was coincident with the disappearance of the distinguished looking foreigner. They were evidently working together for the accomplishment of a common purpose. The government must have had the same thought, for the two fugitives were described in the same circular.

"No; not in the same circular. It was in separate circulars."

Everyone turned around at this remark, which had come so unexpectedly from Count Velasquez.

"No," rejoined Barnes, delighted at this interruption. "I recall it quite well. It was in the same circular."

"Ah," said the count, with a flourish of the hand, "the gentleman means well, but he is mistaken."

"What do you know about it, count?" asked the chief, with brutal abruptness; "were you there?"